



DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

50 CFR Part 635

[Docket No. 220919-0193]

RTID 0648-XC894

Atlantic Highly Migratory Species; Atlantic Bluefin Tuna Fisheries; Closure of the Angling Category Gulf of Mexico Incidental Trophy Fishery for 2023

AGENCY: National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Commerce.

ACTION: Temporary rule; closure.

SUMMARY: NMFS closes the Angling category Gulf of Mexico incidental fishery for large medium and giant (“trophy” (*i.e.*, measuring 73 inches (185 cm) curved fork length or greater)) Atlantic bluefin tuna (BFT). This action applies to Highly Migratory Species (HMS) Angling and HMS Charter/Headboat permitted vessels when fishing recreationally.

DATES: Effective 11:30 p.m., local time, May 9, 2023, through December 31, 2023.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Ann Williamson,

ann.williamson@noaa.gov, 301-427-8503, Larry Redd, Jr., larry.redd@noaa.gov, 301-427-8503, or Nicholas Velseboer, nicholas.velseboer@noaa.gov, 978-281-9260.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: Atlantic HMS fisheries, including BFT fisheries, are managed under the authority of the Atlantic Tunas Convention Act (ATCA; 16 U.S.C. 971 *et seq.*) and the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act; 16 U.S.C. 1801 *et seq.*). The 2006 Consolidated Atlantic HMS Fishery Management Plan (FMP) and its amendments are implemented by regulations at 50 CFR part 635. Section 635.27 divides the U.S. BFT quota recommended

by the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) and as implemented by the United States among the various domestic fishing categories, per the allocations established in the 2006 Consolidated HMS FMP and its amendments. NMFS is required under the Magnuson-Stevens Act to provide U.S. fishing vessels with a reasonable opportunity to harvest quotas under relevant international fishery agreements, such as the ICCAT Convention, which is implemented domestically pursuant to ATCA.

Under § 635.28(a)(1), NMFS files a closure action with the Office of the Federal Register for publication when a BFT quota (or subquota) is reached or is projected to be reached. Retaining, possessing, or landing BFT under that quota category is prohibited on and after the effective date and time of a closure action for that category, for the remainder of the fishing year, until the opening of the subsequent quota period or until such date as specified.

The 2023 BFT fishing year, which is managed on a calendar-year basis and subject to an annual calendar-year quota, began January 1, 2023. The Angling category season opened January 1, 2023, and continues through December 31, 2023. The Angling category baseline quota is 297.4 metric tons (mt), of which 9.2 mt is suballocated for the harvest of large medium and giant (trophy) BFT by vessels fishing under the Angling category quota, with 2.3 mt allocated for each of the following areas: North of 42° N lat. (the Gulf of Maine area); south of 42° N lat. and north of 39°18' N lat. (the southern New England area); south of 39°18' N lat., and outside of the Gulf of Mexico (the southern area); and the Gulf of Mexico region. Trophy BFT measure 73 inches (185 cm) curved fork length or greater. This action applies to the Gulf of Mexico.

Angling Category Large Medium and Giant Gulf of Mexico “Trophy” Fishery Closure

Based on landings data from the NMFS Automated Catch Reporting System, as well as average catch rates and anticipated fishing conditions, NMFS projects the

Angling category Gulf of Mexico incidental trophy BFT subquota of 2.3 mt has been reached and exceeded. Therefore, retaining, possessing, or landing large medium or giant (*i.e.*, measuring 73 inches (185 cm) curved fork length or greater) BFT in the Gulf of Mexico by persons aboard HMS Angling and HMS Charter/Headboat permitted vessels (when fishing recreationally) must cease at 11:30 p.m. local time on May 9, 2023. This closure will remain effective through December 31, 2023. This action applies to HMS Angling and HMS Charter/Headboat permitted vessels when fishing recreationally for BFT, and is taken consistent with the regulations at § 635.28(a)(1). This action is intended to prevent further overharvest of the Angling category Gulf of Mexico incidental trophy BFT subquota.

If needed, subsequent Angling category adjustments will be published in the **Federal Register**. Information regarding the Angling category fishery for Atlantic tunas, including daily retention limits for BFT measuring 27 inches (68.5 cm) to less than 73 inches (185 cm), and any further Angling category adjustments, is available at <https://hmspermits.noaa.gov> or by calling 978-281-9260. Fishermen aboard HMS Angling and HMS Charter/Headboat permitted vessels may catch and release (or tag and release) BFT of all sizes, subject to the requirements of the catch-and-release and tag-and-release programs at § 635.26. All BFT that are released must be handled in a manner that will maximize survival, and without removing the fish from the water, consistent with requirements at § 635.21(a)(1). For additional information on safe handling, see the “Careful Catch and Release” brochure available at <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/resource/outreach-and-education/careful-catch-and-release-brochure/>.

HMS Angling and HMS Charter/Headboat permitted vessel owners are required to report the catch of all BFT retained or discarded dead, within 24 hours of the landing(s) or end of each trip, by accessing <https://hmspermits.noaa.gov>, using the HMS

Catch Reporting app, or calling 888-872-8862 (Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. until 4:30 p.m.).

Classification

NMFS issues this action pursuant to section 305(d) of the Magnuson-Stevens Act and regulations at 50 CFR part 635 and is exempt from review under Executive Order 12866.

The Assistant Administrator for NMFS (AA) finds that pursuant to 5 U.S.C. 553(b)(B), it is impracticable and contrary to the public interest to provide prior notice of, and an opportunity for public comment on, this action for the following reasons. Specifically, the regulations implementing the 2006 Consolidated HMS FMP and its amendments provide for inseason adjustments and fishery closures to respond to the unpredictable nature of BFT availability on the fishing grounds, the migratory nature of this species, and the regional variations in the BFT fishery. Providing for prior notice and opportunity to comment is impracticable and contrary to the public interest as this fishery is currently underway and delaying this action could result in further excessive trophy BFT landings that may result in future potential quota reductions for the Angling category, depending on the magnitude of a potential Angling category overharvest. NMFS must close the Gulf of Mexico incidental trophy BFT fishery before additional landings of these sizes of BFT occur. Taking this action does not raise conservation and management concerns. NMFS notes that the public had an opportunity to comment on the underlying rulemakings that established the U.S. BFT quota and the inseason adjustment criteria.

For all of the above reasons, the AA also finds that pursuant to 5 U.S.C. 553(d), there is good cause to waive the 30-day delay in effectiveness.

Authority: 16 U.S.C. 971 *et seq.* and 1801 *et seq.*

Dated: May 5, 2023.

Jennifer M. Wallace,

Acting Director, Office of Sustainable Fisheries,

National Marine Fisheries Service.

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